

# The Capital

WRITTEN BY WANIT CHARUNGKITANAN

Translated by Noah Viernes, Jennifer Thepsenavong and Bryce Beemer

Edited and with an introduction by Bryce Beemer

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## TRANSLATORS' NOTE

Wanit Charungkitanan's classic short story "The Capital" was translated as a classroom project for an advanced Thai translation course (THAI 415) at the University of Hawai'i by Noah Viernes, Jennifer Thepsenavong, and Bryce Beemer. The finished project was edited and slightly abridged by Bryce Beemer. The translators would like to thank Professor Yuphaphann Hoonchamlong for her tirelessly inventive language instruction and her assistance and encouragement throughout this translation project. Professor Yuphaphann's class was designed to harmonize with another innovative UH course taught by John McGlynn on "the art of translation." Artistic lessons from that class directly filtered into this translation project. For this reason the translators would also like to extend thanks to John McGlynn and to Paul Rausch, the Coordinator for the UH Center for Southeast Asian Studies, for organizing and promoting so many translation projects here in Hawaii.

## Editor's Introduction

Wanit Charungkitanan's short story "The Capital" is considered one of the greatest examples of Thai social realism, a school of writing in Thailand and elsewhere, mostly written by the activist left and designed to bring attention to subaltern voices and the struggles of the downtrodden. It is a darkly comic tale of an economic migrant slowly driven insane by Bangkok's notoriously horrible rush hour traffic. "The Capital" was one of many well-received short stories written by Wanit between 1978 and 1983 and published together in his SEA Write Award winning collection "In the Same Alleyway" (*Soi Diawkan*).

While "The Capital" is a classic of social realism, social realism does not define his style, or his politics. Wanit is a master of light satire and a popular columnist in newspapers and magazines; he frequently writes

women's fiction, TV soap opera scripts, poetry and romantic fiction. The overriding theme of his work is the conflict in Thai society between traditional culture and modernity. His partisan interest is in the preservation of tradition. This light strain of conservatism demarcates an ideological distance between Wanit and most other Thai authors of social realism. Returning to the eclectic nature of Wanit's writing, it is interesting to note that many stories from "In the Same Alleyway" deals with the very unreal world of the supernatural. But even in Wanit's ghost stories, specters symbolize the voices and values of the past that are trampled down and angered by the ill-considered forces of modernization.

Wanit was born in 1949 in what was then the rural province of Supanburi. His father was a Chinese immigrant; his mother a Sino-Thai market woman. His fam-

ily climbed from the working to middle class when his father was promoted by the local rice mill from barge operator to mill manager. Wanit originally pursued a career in art. In 1974 he left for California to study printmaking at an American university. While studying, Wanit made a name for himself writing satirical essays about American life for several Thai periodicals. The success of these essays encouraged a move from art to writing. While a champion of tradition, Wanit's own life is a paragon of modern day success. He parlayed his creative energy and popular literary success into lucrative executive positions in media, publishing, and television production companies. He is one of the creative founders of Grammy Entertainment, Thailand's extremely successful multi-media juggernaut.

The short story "The Capital" is striking for how well it has held up over the last twenty plus years. Traffic in Thailand is still terrible and the buses are overcrowded nightmares during rush hour. The story remains comically evocative for anyone who has ever boarded a Bangkok bus during the rainy season. One thing, however, has changed for the better. Northeastern migrants to the capital, the *Isaan* or Lao people that fill so many of the working class jobs in Bangkok, no longer conceal their rural culture, half-embarrassedly, from their ostensibly more sophisticated Bangkok cousins. Compared to two decades ago, they are loud (Lao'd) and proud. The Bangkok of 2007 constantly rocks to the sound of *Isaan* country music. Today, if a lonely, golden-throated Lao boy started singing on a crowded bus, many passengers would know the words and surely join in.

## The Capital

Another day goes by...

...I thought as I straightened my desk and walked straight from work to the bus stop. I was too exhausted and disheartened to notice what was going on around me. There was nothing worth looking at anyway. It's always the same after work, a crush of grim people going to and fro. Each face an expression of grumpiness and gloom.

I halted briefly at a construction site for shop houses. A none-too-small stone chunk crashed down in front of me. If I'd been walking just a bit faster it would've struck my head. It wasn't big enough to crack my skull, but it would have given me a lump. I looked up to see

people busily working above. No one cared that a stone had nearly grazed my skull.

A change in the wind signaled rain. The sky darkened with clouds. I picked up my pace wanting to get home before the rain, but it was impossible. My only hope was to get on a bus before the deluge.

As always, people crowded around the bus stop, no one taking notice of anyone else. Groups stood together chitchatting, watching the buses roll into the bus stop. At the same time there were others, like myself, standing alone and watching attentively for their bus to come along. I prayed with my heart that my bus would have just a bit of space.

Praying is better than nothing. And look at that! A bus comes my way, but jam-packed.

I squeezed up and got one foot on the outside step. My one hand grasped the handle inside the bus door; the other clutched a book to my chest. I felt so lucky that I caught a bus before the rain started splattering down.

Edging into the traffic circle, the bus jerked forward randomly. All sorts of vehicles were scrambling to be first into the circle. The cars were all bottlenecked up. A car and taxi struck one another. I hung from the bus as it toiled its way through the roundabout, leaving the chaos behind only to encounter another gummy situation at the next intersection.

The traffic stopped so long that I dropped down onto the road and stood there to ease my exhaustion. How could traffic move when the cars are this crisscrossed and confused? Stoplights had no meaning since cars couldn't move with the green. Cars were all clustered together in the middle of the intersection. Instead of yielding on a green light, cars rolled in unwilling to wait for the cars to clear the intersection. Vehicles crawled forward into the jam-up whenever the car in front of them made some headway. Then, when the too brief green light turned red, another slow moving flood of traffic entered from the other direction.

By the time the police arrived to wave the traffic through, drivers stuck in the middle of the intersection were despairing at one another. Nearly half an hour was spent stuck in that intersection. As for me, I'd become so physically exhausted I just wanted to lay right down on the congested road.

As soon as the bus was able to move, it began to drizzle. The bus progressed to the next stop. At the door where I was hanging, only one passenger got off quickly, while there were dozens of people waiting to board. As a result, before the passengers who wanted to get off could weave their way through the crowded bus, the whole thing went higgledy-piggledy because those people waiting to board the bus refused to move aside. Everyone was crowded at the door, myself included.

I refused to release my hand from the doorway, or move the foot that was perched on the stair. I didn't want to lose my spot on the bus and end up stuck in the rain under the eave of some building. While the scramble to board was going on, the driver pulled the bus away. Those people crowded at the door were buffeted by the bus and sent staggering. A middle-aged woman fell down. I had to hop along side the bus two or three times on one leg before I was able to pull myself up onto the outside stair.

I can't take it! My arm is completely exhausted. I try to squeeze myself into the bus until I could stand on the second step. The rain started to fall in fat drops. And the bus is baking hot because every window is shut. Each and every inch of my skin feels sticky. I try using my shoulder to whisk a prickly stream of sweat from my cheek.

The bus pulled into another bus stop. Two to three people got off. Due to the heavy rain, no one was waiting to squeeze in the door. So I wormed my way up the stairs and tried to press onto the back of the bus where there is more air to breath. The pushed passengers were not pleased, but I didn't care. They have a right

to their displeasure. I felt like I could faint due of the heat and the short supply of breathable air. The sweaty smell of those around me made me ever more nauseous.

I felt hungry. The traffic jam was such that it hardly moved. The rain poured down.

In exhaustion I shut my eyes. I grasped the bus's ceiling rail and rested my head on the crook of my arm. I can't understand why I have to suffer like this in Bangkok. I should get back out into the countryside. I should get back home and fish and dig clams and just live life one-day-to-the-next.



Bangkok  
Traffic by  
Paul Rausch

I'm especially exhausted today because my boss sent me all over the city running errands. I nearly dropped dead waiting to cross the Ratchaprasong intersection. I stood on the traffic island and nearly coughed up my lungs as poisonous exhaust from passing cars and revving engines covered me over. I did my utmost to hold my breath, but I could only do it for a short time. When I finally had to take a new breath exhaust particles drew towards my face. I had the real life experience of learning that filthy exhaust is without a trace of oxygen. Inhaling exhaust when my body really needed oxygen made me gag, made my ears ring, then I fainted.

I really want to get back to my home in the countryside. I really do. But I have no idea what I'd do there. There isn't any work. Except, as I mentioned earlier, fishing and clam digging, which really don't pay the bills. I can't find coolie work at the mill carrying things about on my back. My back isn't up to the job.

The bus rolled forward a little. The rain was still falling and the water started overflowing onto the road. As a result, cars began to break down and the jam-up tightened.

I can't begin to tell you how hot and steamy that bus was getting. Every person I could see was twitching with anxiety. The bus had been stuck for a while now and the air was stifling. In truth the rain should have helped cool the bus, but this bus was packed tight and every window was shut. The collective body heat brought the bus up to the baking temperature. The longer the bus sat, the hotter it got, until I thought I would go mad.

My legs were tired and I felt like sitting down. There is no sign of anyone getting up. At the center of the bus, two children and their mother clung to the back of a chair. The young man sitting in front of them had no thought of offering them the seat. I don't blame him. If I was sitting right now, I'm not sure I would offer my seat to anyone.

I continued to squeeze myself along until I stood at the rear of the bus. I turned my head around toward the back so I could breathe more easily.

It's been an hour already since I boarded this bus, but it's still a long way before I reach home. I closed my tired eyes and give a dejected sigh.

It's at times like these that I want to go back home to the country. I don't understand why people crowd into Bangkok. If I had a choice, I would not live in this big,

terrible city. But that's just it... There are probably jillions of people who think as I do, but they have a choice.

The bus toiled on to another stop. In fact, it sat at the bus stop for a long time, only no one knew until the driver shifted the bus into gear, and the fare collector shouted for passengers to get off.

A man sitting farthest to the back shifted his body. Because I was facing the back of the bus, I took notice before anyone else. I gave him silent thanks as he stood up with some difficulty, as there was no free space for him to easily support himself. He had to place one hand on the seat cushion and grab at the railing with the other.

I stretched my leg out to reserve the seat because two to three others in the section shifted as if they would move to sit down. I feel sorry for those people. I apologize. Please let me sit first. I can't take it anymore. I am going to faint from exhaustion and starvation and weakness.

I sat down and leaned my head up against the head rest. I was determined to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come. It was so hot the sweat dripped down my shirt and stuck to my legs due to the broiling temperature in my heavy-weight jeans.

Unable to sleep, I sat straight and placed a book on my lap. I closed my eyes to pray that the bus would move a little faster. The heat and smelly sweat was uncomfortable beyond all description. I felt like some prisoner stuffed into the bus to be taken to who knows where, certainly nowhere good.

Oy... I groaned silently, as the bus moved on a bit and then got stuck all over again. Seven people were sitting next to me on the bench seat at the rear of this bus. I examined each one's expression thinking that none could be feeling any differently than me. I was sitting three seats in from the door. The first person, sitting closest to the door, was a guy with a gullible, starry-eyed sort of look, meaning he likely came from the countryside. He probably hasn't been in Bangkok long, probably from the Northeast. His appearance led me to this conclusion.

His shirt was unbuttoned down three buttons such that one could see the sweat on his muscled chest. He was stout and likely came here as a construction worker. I didn't know what else to do, my thoughts drifted around aimlessly.



The next person over, sitting beside me, was another guy. His look was similar to mine. He was probably a low-level office worker like me. The next person over from me was a woman in a tube skirt. She was probably a market lady. Next to her was another younger woman who worked for a company as well. Her outfit was a matching purple uniform, so she likely worked at a department store or, barring that, worked in retail. The next one over was a man in a t-shirt, but I can't guess what kind of work he does. The final person was probably a college guy; he dressed a lot like a student.

I sat watching them a while, before closing my eyes again. The bus was again at a standstill since a car broke down in the middle of the intersection. The rain let up a bit. I looked outside the window and saw a man pushing a car, but it was hopeless because he was hemmed in on all sides by traffic. Were he to push it forward it would likely crunch into one of the surrounding vehicles.

My heart went out to him. He was drenched with rain. The people in my bus looked on with faces empty of emotion. They may even have felt that he was getting what he deserved.

Is it even possible that this is just the normal course of events?

How will I withstand this torture any longer? I've been in this bus almost two hours. It's hot as hell and it ain't getting any better. The steaminess is giving me prickly heat. I blow on it without any hope.

No one on this bus is talking to anyone. The people standing in front of me are all smooshed together. All stand silently; some have drooping heads, while others look aimlessly ahead. Some people are watching the road fill with water. I know that every person on this bus is exercising patience. I think the human capacity for extreme patience in a torturous situation like this is no laughing matter. No one is complaining. No one is talking. And no one tries to escape off the bus.

If this bus was a criminal transport, FINE. I'd like it to drive right out of this city. It could go any old place where the traffic doesn't jam up like this... a place where cool wind can blow. A place where you don't have to shut every bus window tight until the steamy heat nearly melts your body down.

I'm about to lose my patience. I'm sitting down, so I think I'm better off than the half that is standing. But the steamy heat is driving me mad.

I miss my home in the countryside. I miss my girlfriend. If only I had a little money and a job near home, I wouldn't have to move around. I wouldn't have to sit through this tormenting torture. I could marry my girl.

Why do the passengers on the bus sit mutely, myself included? Why isn't anyone talking, chatting for fun, having a conversation instead of sitting motionless through this torture? The rain is drizzling but the heat in this hell bus has not diminished. Somebody sing! Why hasn't someone stepped forward to sing? Let's all pretend this is a sightseeing bus heading out to the country. Let's all sing. Let's sing! Why sit still like a bunch of crazies? What is the use of sitting motionless through this torture? Let's all sing!

No one sang out like I wanted... A country song, sing a country song. It can be any song, a fast song or a slow song. Please let's just sing together. Quickly. How about *"Rain Falls, Traffic Jam"* by Surachai? Someone, anyone, sing a song, please. Sornkiri's song *"Flood"* would be all right. *"Flooding, my dear, you say is better than drought, but I think drought is better than flooding..."* Sing, please. Sing, please. I'll do back-up vocals.

On the inside I am imploring. The bus shifted again, stuck at another intersection. Lengthy, lengthy lingering... I think I might decompose. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I don't think any patience remains in me. I should get off the bus and eat a plate of noodles. Sit happily in a noodle shop, wait for conditions to improve, and then wait for the next bus.

*I can't sit on this hellhole bus a moment longer.  
 "...the sweet smell of the Acacia flower,  
 richly mixed with the scent of hay...  
 ...the mushrooms creep up the Yanang vine  
 I see the water-lilies floating  
 along the surface of the water..."*

The enchanting sound of the country song *"Moon-rak Luk thung"* came from somewhere. Who turned on the radio? I hesitated as I was standing and remained in my seat... Such a nice *'luk thung'* country voice. It's that young northeastern guy. My main man! Sing on. Sing on. I smiled at him as I looked on, but he didn't take notice. He closed his eyes and rested his hands together on his lap. He could sing well, it was pretty.

*"...I'd like to pluck one up and breath in its the scent,  
 I reach for it but cannot reach  
 I'd like to transform into a bumblebee,  
 so I can caress that beautiful waterlily..."*

It was so melodic. My heart brimmed with admiration.

I forgot all the stress brought on by this suffocating heat. Then there came the sound of loud giggling coming from the people standing in front of me. I looked to see who it was. I cursed the person who made that laugh. All the passengers seated around me and everyone that I saw stared at the young singer. But he didn't seem to care, he didn't open his eyes.

*"The sweet scent of the earth mixes with the rain..."*

Wow. My heart drifted off to the countryside the moment he sang this line.

*"...and with aroma of beautiful cheeks..."*

I thought longingly of my girlfriend. She was as lovable, as I was destitute. I didn't have enough money to marry her.

*"The soft sound of the flute whistled through rows of the sugar palm tree,  
the enchanting country songs of country folk drift softly in..."*

It's like this...just like this. In my rural province, in my backyard, the sugar palm trees are in rows. I can play the flute. I am a singer in the *ramwong* dance troupe near my home.

*"Take the fishing rod and hook on some bait..."*

Do you see? It's about going fishing. Getting in the boat to go fishing. I hummed along. I couldn't restrain myself. There was a girl with pretty cheeks a'fishing. Dreams. I was having a private dream, one in which my girlfriend gets on a boat to go fishing with me. A dreamy dream I can only dream about.

*"Our golden abundant fields.  
I hear enchanting country love songs from the village fields  
The sweet, vibrating timbre..."*

I shut my eyes. I didn't want to hear the people who were snickering. This young man was making me happy and I didn't want to see the looks of people who thought he was nuts. I thought that the atmosphere on the bus was getting better, *weirdly* better. I didn't like the sound of snickering, but even that put a little life into this bus that was hot as hell's abyss,

*"Ohh! The flame tree flower..."* Came the faint, enticing sound of country music. *"...the perfumy smell of your sweet cheeks..."*

It's over. C'mon old friend, repeat the first verse. I'm not sated. One more go-round. Sing on. My main man wouldn't sing. He sat, as he was before with his eyes closed. I started clapping loudly. I was the only one. Then came clapping sounds from a few others sitting on the bench seat. One was the lady in the tube skirt who sat beside me, and two or three others who I couldn't see were clapping in the middle of the bus. From the front of the bus came the sound of chattering conversation. Then there was the voice of the fare collector laughing out, "This sounds great."

The bus rolled forward a short distance and turned into to a bus stop. Just then a young man started exiting the bus, but before he did he turned toward the young singer and howled, "Nut job!"

I'm not sure how it all happened, but before the kid could step off the bus, I leapt up and grabbed him around the collar. I barked, "You're the crazy one, shithead!"

The kid looked startled. His face lost color. When I saw that he had no fight in him, I let go of his collar and dropped back into my seat. The bus moved on. The young singer sat still and didn't open his eyes. There was silence on the bus. I gave the young singer a look that implored him to keep singing, but he just sat quietly.

Once again, the bus rolled forward into a congested intersection, halted before it could turn. If we could turn onto that street, we'd be in the clear, but we'll be stuck here for long while. There was no way through this intersection. The steamy, baking heat was still here... Keep on singing, my brother. Sing! Sing your heart out! Sing on! My heart shouted this to him. Lots of people were sneaking looks at me. They must've been surprised to see me lash out at that young guy, but I didn't care about their looks. I glanced back in the direction of my young singer. I prayed for him to keep singing.

*"Because I'm destitute,  
I'm invisible to everyone"*

Hey, hey... it's "*Far From Home*" by Khawanchai Phetcharoiet. My prayer materialized. My main man heard me. His voice was loud, reverberating through the bus. And there was no snickering. I was happy.

*"I've got to depart from home,  
from my mother and father,  
who wait attentively for my return..."*

It's just the same with my mother. The young man's yearning voice resonated with my own heart.

*"I had to leave my love,  
the forests and the fields,  
to come find work..."*

My main man. I'm right there with you.

*"Because I'm destitute,  
I must struggle forth to the great city.  
My melancholy heart trembles."*

Melancholy... I feel the melancholia. Alas, my love. Alas, my girlfriend. Who knows when I'll get back home to marry her?

*"Working with the sweat flowing wet,  
a darkened face,  
I work on because I'm without means..."*

That's right, Comrade. I'm the same. You're right, my main man. Could we be true friends? I looked on with admiration. The young singer was unconcerned by those around him. His eyes stayed closed. I stared straight at his face. Many others on the bus did the same. The fare collector trotted over and stood on the stairs smiling and staring at my young singer.

*"Malai, my love..."*

This! This is how it should be. *Luk thung* singers should be just like this. The haunting vibrato sound of his voice trailed off at the end of the phrase. I was lost in the moment, tapping my finger against my book.

*"Don't reproach me for being away  
its because I'm poor that that I must leave you.  
When I'm far from you sweetness, don't harshly  
opine  
If I can escape this destitution, honey,  
it will all work out fine."*

That's right my little country garland named Malai. That's right my tender Malai flower. My sweetie's name isn't "Malai," but right this moment I'd really like to give her that name. The young singer shifted. A single tear ran down his weathered cheek. My heart sank. Was it really a tear? It was. The lashes of one eye were soaked into clumps. Alas, my main man. Like the singer, I choked up. My eyes welled.

*"Because I'm far from you.  
My mind is carelessly drifting."*

Drifting... I am drifting. Is there anyone out there like me that isn't adrift? Far from their true love, and

with no chance for union...

*"I miss her. I miss her all the time  
I'm distracted, uneasy, restless at heart..."*

My eyes gave the sign they would spill up tears, while my boy's tears flowed down like a stream. I felt so deeply moved by his trembling vibrato voice. Especially when he sings, *"I miss her. I miss her all the time."* I choked up. The bus began to creep forward.

*"I'm far off, but my heart is near.  
Please, please don't ever stray  
while I'm off so far away."*

About this, I'm not so certain. My girl and I have been apart for a long time. We haven't been writing to each other. I applauded when he stopped singing and the sound of clapping followed mine all around the bus. I tilted my head down, scrunched my eyes, and pretended to freshen my face, covertly wiping the tears away. I didn't want others to know I was crying.

Applause and loud laughter continued as the bus turned quickly down a connecting road.

The bus came to a stop. The young singer got up. The fair collector observed this and called out to the driver, "Hold up. The singer is getting off now."

Everyone turned to look, applause sounded again. My young singer took no notice of the clapping. The trail of tears was still damp on his face.

He started down the stairs. I wasn't to my stop yet, but I followed after him. Off the bus, he readied himself to forge on. I had no idea what I should do next. Should I greet him or just start talking?

"Excuse me. Wait a second." I asked in a rush of words, "I need to know, have you gone insane?"

"No..." The young singer shook his head, "but all things considered, I wish I was crazy." He answered and then disappeared into a crowd pushing to get onto the bus.